

VZCZCXR08541

RR RUEHAG RUEHAST RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHDF RUEHIK RUEHLH RUEHLD RUEHLZ
RUEHPW RUEHROV RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHAA #0754/01 1650955
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 130955Z JUN 08
FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0990
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 3904
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1721
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1588
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 2157
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2601
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000754

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, SCA/PPD, EUR/ACE, DRL
AID/W FOR EE/EA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [EAID](#) [KDEM](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN REGISTERS FIRST NGO SINCE 2005

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (U) SUMMARY: On June 3, 2008, Turkmenistan's Ministry of Justice registered the Ak-Bugday Gardeners' Association as a public association. Post believes this is the first non-governmental organization (NGO) registered by the Ministry since 2005, and is the first community-based NGO registered in the country. The organization's mission is to defend the rights of gardeners residing in Saglyk Village, located on the outskirts of Ashgabat. The community members have actively participated in USAID's Civic Society Support Initiative and Turkmen Community Empowerment Programs since 2005.

UNCLEAR LEGAL STATUS PROMPTED RESIDENTS TO UNITE

¶3. (U) Saglyk Village was initially started as a community of dachas (summer homes) in 1986. As a result, the administrative status of the village remained unclear, which created problems for community citizens to resolve social and economic issues with the local authorities. To address the situation, community members decided to elect a community board to advocate for the interests of community members. In 2005, the village board, together with community activists, first applied for registration as an NGO so it would have improved legal status to undertake advocacy campaigns. Its efforts to register were not successful. Although approximately 90 NGOs were re-registered under the 2003 NGO law that required existing NGOs to be reregistered, the Ministry of Justice had stopped registering new organizations by 2005.

USAID'S COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAM TRAINED ACTIVISTS

¶4. (U) The Saglyk community's inhabitants, the majority of whom make a living by raising fruit and vegetables, actively participated in USAID/ Counterpart International's Civic Society Support Initiative, which provided training and a community action grant to help residents solve the village's most important problem -- building a new irrigation system. The improved irrigation helped village inhabitants increase fruit and vegetable yields, which considerably increased their incomes.

¶5. (U) After carrying out the irrigation system improvement project with USAID's grant funding, the community's strong fundraising and

advocacy skills allowed the members to carry out additional infrastructure projects on their own. For example, one community activist initiated a self-financed project to repair and pave one of the village's roads, fix streetlamps, and organize waste removal. Working in conjunction with local authorities, another activist secured the installation of new telephone communication lines. Local authorities supported their initiative by providing machinery and specialists, and by arranging the delivery of equipment.

VILLAGE NOW SERVES AS POSITIVE EXAMPLE FOR NEIGHBORS

¶ 6. (U) Recognizing the benefits from collective actions, neighboring villages viewed Saglyk's residents as a positive example of self-governance, participatory decision-making, and social partnership. Activists from neighboring villages have traveled to Saglyk to hear their experiences and continue learn from their experiences. (NOTE: On June 26, 2007, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Evan Feigenbaum visited Saglyk community and met with the community activists and local government representatives. END NOTE.)

¶ 7. (U) COMMENT: Post believes this is the first non-governmental organization (NGO) registered by the Ministry since 2005. If so, this represents a very positive change in official attitudes toward the role of NGOs in a civil society, since the group's mission is to advocate for its members' interests.

¶ 8. (U) COMMENT CONTINUED: The Ak-Bugday Gardeners' Association is also, to Post's knowledge, the first community-based NGO registered in the country. In response to the 2003 law on NGO registration and

ASHGABAT 00000754 002 OF 002

the limited pool of registered NGOs, USAID and Counterpart changed the focus of their civil society development program to work more closely with communities. As a result, the faces of USAID's civil society development program partners shifted along with its objectives. Instead of supporting the "usual suspects" of old-school, largely ethnic Russian civic activists, Counterpart provided 140 grants of less than \$5,000 each between 2004-2006 that helped predominantly rural, ethnic Turkmen communities to improve their lives through greater access to potable water, gas, electricity, and other social infrastructure. While some of these groups came together to carry out discrete projects, others have remained cohesive and continue to work together to address issues of collective importance. That the residents of Saglyk community persisted in their efforts to register while continuing to engage constructively with local officials demonstrates the positive effects of the grass-roots approach to civil society development in Turkmenistan. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND